

"CONTRABAND"

By RANDALL PARRISH

Copyright A. C. McClurg & Co.

A Thrilling War
Story of the
North Atlantic

THE CASTAWAYS ARE SIGHTED BY A SHIP, THE INDIAN CHIEF, WHICH TAKES THEM ABOARD—HERE THEY FIND CONDITIONS RATHER AMAZING

Synopsis—Robert Hollis, who tells the story, is a guest on Girard Carrington's yacht, the *Esmeralda*. It is supposed to be a "stag" party, and Hollis is surprised on discovering a woman, who evidently wishes to remain unknown aboard. Hollis, the next night, succeeds in having an interview with the woman. She merely tells him her name is Vera. Carrington tells his guests of the coming war, and that he is engineering a copper pool. The yacht is sunk in a collision and Hollis saves McCann, millionaire, and one of the party. Hollis and McCann rescue Vera and leave the ship in a small boat. McCann refuses to submit to the authority of Hollis, and the latter enforces obedience.

CHAPTER VII—Continued.

However, our conversation lapsed at last, through sheer weariness on my part. I had been at the steering oar so long, staring out into that drear expanse of ocean and sky, that every muscle of my body ached, and my eyes could scarcely be forced to remain open. In the silence she must have noticed this, for she exclaimed suddenly: "Why, I never thought! you must be nearly dead with fatigue. Let me take the oar while you sleep."

"I am afraid I shall have to," I admitted, "for I must keep awake tonight. You feel competent?"

"Why, of course; you saw me steer. If anything goes wrong I can call you easily enough. Please lie down for a few hours."

I looked about, permitting her to grasp the oar, and slip into my seat.

"Really I feel as if I must," I said regretfully, "and there can be no danger while things keep as they are. Call me, though, if there is a change in the weather, for that jury mast will never stand any weight of wind."

"I promise; but I am a better boatman than you think."

I must have slept for several hours undisturbed, for, when I finally opened my eyes once more the sky above us was beginning to turn purple with twilight, and the breeze had failed, so that the sail flapped idly against its improvised mast. This, perhaps, was the noise which had aroused me. I sat up wide awake instantly, and stared about me in the boat. There was little change noticeable; Miss Vera still clung to the steering oar, showing no outward signs of weariness, and greeted me with a smile and nod of the head; but McCann had moved forward, and sat playing idly with an open jack-knife.

"I hear testimony that you slept well, Mr. Hollis," the girl said cheerfully.

"I did not realize until I lay down how weary I was," I replied, adopting her manner, "but really you had no right to let me lie so long. Why, I must have been sleeping three or four hours, and you will be tired out."

"Oh, no; it was no trick at all. The wind kept steady until just a few moments ago, and I do not feel in the least fatigued."

"And you have seen nothing? no smoke, no sail?"

She shook her head, her eyes grown grave.

"Not a thing; we seem to be absolutely alone in the immensity of the sea—just one great wave after the other. It—it gets on my nerves."

"It certainly does; such a sight has driven more than one insane. But what does this mean? Why is the biscuit bag out here?"

I pointed to the bottom of the boat, beyond her feet. Her eyes met mine, her answer made in a whisper.

"He—he crept back here while I was adjusting my oar, and took two."

"McCann?"

"Yes, he had the bag before I noticed, and I thought it best not to anger him then, for he held that open knife in his hand."

"You should have called me."

"The mischief was done before I had any time. Besides I knew you needed the sleep. What are you going to do?"

I smiled a bit grimly, glimpsing him beneath the sail.

"I am about to give Mr. Fergus McCann, late of New York, a little specimen of sea discipline which I hope may last him for the remainder of this voyage," I replied quietly. "Hold the boat steady, Miss Vera, and leave me to attend to this degenerate son of wealth."

I crept forward, scarcely jarring the frail craft, and was beyond the jury mast before the fellow had aroused sufficiently from his knife play even to notice my approach. He stared at me

solely, leaving the keen blade trembling in the plank.

"McCann," I began, wasting no time in preliminaries, lifting myself on one knee, and facing him, "the young lady says you took advantage of my being sound asleep to help yourself to biscuits; is that so?"

"Well, what if I did? I was hungry." "So am I; so no doubt is the lady, for the matter of that. Hunger is no justification for stealing. You were not starving; you received exactly the same share we did. More than that, I have assumed command of this boat, because I am the only one on board knowing the ways of the sea. I told you plainly what you were to do, and I propose to enforce my orders. Not another bite will be given you today, or tomorrow."

"Is that so?" he drawled, a wicked smile revealing his teeth. "You must think you are dealing with a foremast hand. It takes something besides threats to run me, Mr. Robert Hollis."

He half arose to his feet, but I forced him back onto the thwart, none too gently. His face was red with passion, his eyes malevolent.

"D— you! take your hands off me!" he snarled. "No blustering sea bully is going to make me jump at the crook of his finger. You touch me again, and I'll show you who I am, you big brute. Me take orders from you? Why, pooh; I've got more money in New York than you ever saw."

"If you owned the Bank of England it would mean nothing to me. You will do what I say, or I'll make you."

"No matter how; I've trained more men than you to obedience in my time, and always found a way."

"Huh! the bucko-mate business, hey?" he sneered. "Well, just try that on me, if you think it safe. I'll show you—"

His hand darted back toward his hip pocket, but I was looking for the movement, and ready. His fingers had barely gripped the butt of his weapon when my clinched fist crashed into his face. I have struck harder blows, for I was not poised to put my whole weight behind it, yet the man went over as though felled by an ax, and lay huddled in the bows quivering like a jelly fish. I jerked the revolver from the grip of his hand, dropped it into my pocket, wrenched the open knife from the wood in which it stuck, and closed the blade.

"Get up now, you fool," I ordered sharply. "Oh, yes, you will," and I gripped him by the collar and lifted him roughly to his knees. "That is likely to be the last time you will ever attempt to pull a gun on me. Make another movement, McCann, and I'll throw you overboard. You take your orders from me, and you must jump when I speak, or I shall take pleasure in breaking every bone in your body. Do you understand that?"

I doubt if he could see out of one eye, but the other exhibited a terror almost pitiable.

"Y—yes."

"Say sir, when you speak to me."

"Yes—yes, sir."

"You'll keep to this end of the boat hereafter; whether I am asleep or awake, you stay forward of the jury mast."

CHAPTER VIII.

We Sight a Tramp.

The one blow, coupled with the loss of his weapons, had so completely cowed the fellow, that I scarcely gave him another thought. I crept back to the stern, and took the steering oar, the girl's eyes meeting mine questioningly.

"I could not see all that occurred, because of the sail," she said. "You disarmed the man?"

"Yes, I have his revolver in my pocket, and the knife also. He will make no more trouble. Come, we will divide a biscuit between us, and then it will be your turn to lie down."

"But doesn't McCann have any?"

"He has had more than his share already. I'll offer him a swallow of water—that's all. I imagine the way his head feels, he has forgotten all about being hungry."

"You had to strike him?"

"Slightly, a mere tap of sea discipline," and I glanced at my knuckles. "He was armed, you know, and I could take no chances. There is no harm done. Come; are you not tired enough to rest?"

She glanced up into my face.

"You will call me at midnight, if I fall asleep?"

"If I feel worn out then, and the sea keeps as it is, or no worse. There, take my coat for a pillow. No, really I shall not need it; this is an ideal summer night, but we are out of the track of ships."

"But do you still believe we will find one?"

"I have every faith in the world," I answered heartily, determined to conceal my doubts. "If the weather holds pleasant, we should be far enough south by morning to be in the north Atlantic lane between New York and Liverpool. Lie down, and rest, Miss Vera; there is no sign of any storm brewing, and tomorrow you'll probably have the deck of a liner under your feet."

I know not how much she may have believed of what I said, but she smiled me a cheerful good-night, and lay down in the bottom of the boat, my coat folded under her head. She rested there motionless, her face shadowed by one arm, and very soon her regular breathing convinced me she slept like a tired child. I looked at her shadowy figure; then forward to where McCann hung silent in the bows.

What if—should not overhaul a ship? What if some evil fate would permit of our floating on unseen? And there were few eatable biscuits left, and barely a cupful of tepid water. The thought of what the end might be nearly crazed me, as I sat there alone in the silence and gloom—I could picture those final hours of despair, as we lay starved and helpless in the unguided boat, the girl mercifully unconscious, perhaps, and McCann a gibbering idiot. My God! I must stop thinking! I must be a man for her sake; aye, and retain my self-control, so as to do a man's work to the end.

At midnight the wind was at its height, and I did not call the girl, as I dared not trust her to steer the craft through such rough water. She slept undisturbed, not even changing her position, a mere dim outline at my feet. Forward McCann had stowed himself away beyond the bow thwart, and I could see nothing of him under the light of the sail. I was the only one awake in the leaping boat, fighting its desperate way through black waters under the dull gleam of the stars.

The sun had begun to show above the horizon before the girl finally awoke, and sat up in the bottom of the boat, staring about her with wide-open eyes, as though startled by the change in the aspect of the sea. Finally she lifted herself to the nearest thwart, and greeted me reproachfully.

"You have let me sleep all night, and lying on your coat. You must be tired nearly to death."

"Far from it; and we are to be blessed with another day of sunshine. Perhaps by afternoon the sea will have gone down, and I can get a nap. Are you ready for breakfast?"

My explanation did not satisfy her; I could read that in the expression of her face, but she made no further protest.

She drew out the biscuits from the locker, broke one in two, and handed the half to me. Still clinging to the bag, her glance fell upon the slouching figure of McCann in the bow, and then her eyes sought my face questioningly.

"You are not going to offer him any?"

"He deserves none; he has already had more than both of us together. How many are left?"

"Seven fit to eat. But—" she hesitated, yet went on bravely enough, "please, he is not accustomed to being deprived of food, and is really suffering. Let him have my share, for I am not at all hungry—truly I am not."

"I shall insist on your eating," I said, almost sternly. "Your share is little enough to sustain life. If it comes to a choice between saving you, and that miserable thing yonder, my course is

taken. However, I grant your request now, although I doubt if he shows even gratitude. McCann!"

He lifted his head, and stared aft, but without changing attitude.

"Here is your ration. You do not deserve a bite, nor would you receive any through me. You owe this to the lady—catch it now."

He picked the half biscuit up from the bottom of the boat, where it fell at his feet, and began nibbling at it, like a famished dog. There was no sign of thankfulness in his action, and he continued to glare at us with one eye open in sullen insolence.

The sun blazed down upon us out of a clear sky, glistening along the foam of racing waves, but, as noon approached, the southern sky became misty, the clouds increasing in density until we could see only a few hundred yards beyond our bow. It was not a storm cloud, and brought with it no fear of disaster, but completely blotted out the horizon, and gave a dark, sullen gloom to the surrounding waters.

It must have been three o'clock when McCann suddenly gave vent to a startled roar, straightening to his knees, and pointing straight ahead into the smother. I stared, but saw nothing except the grotesque forms assumed by the whirling mist, but Vera leaned out over the side, shading her eyes.

"What is it?" I asked sharply.

"Make a report, man!"

"A ship yonder!" he shouted, but without turning his head. "I saw it plainly enough, but it has gone now."

"I see it, Mr. Hollis!" the girl cried excitedly. "Right out there through that lane of mist—it's a big steamer!"

"Straight ahead?"

"Just a little this way—there! you can see her now!"

I did, a mere glimpse, instantly obscured, but visible again a moment later. McCann was on his feet, gesticulating wildly.

"Now, d— you!" he shouted, "put us on board there, and I'll show you who I am. You brute, I dare you to put us on board!"

"Sit down!" I ordered. "Now, keep still, and stand by with that rope. I'll put you aboard all right, but until I do, you will obey what I say, or go into the water."

I took my eyes off him, and stared at the vessel, conscious instantly that something was wrong. She was apparently a big steel freighter, four thousand tons I guessed, her water line showing a heavy cargo, and her bows red with rust where the black paint had disappeared. The foremast was broken off at the top, remaining a great splinter, and where the bridge and wheelhouse ought to be there was piled a mass of wreckage, showing black above the bulwarks. A wheel had been rigged aft on the poopdeck, and there alone I saw evidence of human beings on board. One fellow stood gripping the spokes, while another leaned motionless against the rail facing forward. Neither one saw us, although I swung my hat, and sent a hail across the intervening water. The girl glanced back into my face.

"What is the matter with them, Mr. Hollis?" she asked. "Is something wrong?"

"I am afraid so; their foretop mast is down, and it looks as though it had smashed the bridge and wheelhouse when it fell. They have rigged up an emergency wheel aft. Can you make out her name?"

"The Indian Chief of Philadelphia."

"No regular liner—probably a tramp. I never saw funnels painted like that before, and she shows no flag. However, any port in a storm."

I stood up, following my hands.

"Ahoy there! Indian Chief, ahoy!"

The man leaning on the after rail turned, and gazed down at us, shading his eyes, and the heads of a half dozen others bobbed up above the forward bulwarks. I could see the fellow aft plainly now, a broad, stockily built man, with extremely red face, wearing overalls, and a woolen shirt, open at the throat. In appearance there was nothing of the officer about him, yet it was his voice which finally answered my hail, sending a deep, roaring note across the waters.

"Hullo, there. Who are yer? From some ship close by?"

"We are passengers from the American yacht *Esmeralda*, sunk in collision two nights ago, and have been afloat ever since. Can you take us aboard?"

"Passengers, you say? All of yer passengers?"

"Yes."

He turned, and spoke to the man grasping the wheel, a tall, loose-jointed fellow in straw hat and pink shirt.

There was a moment's argument before he returned to his position at the rail.

"I dunno as yer would be much better off along with us than yer are thar in the dinghy," he called indifferently. "For, in a manner o' speakin', we're no more than a wreck. I reckon thar ain't no one among yer who knows how to navigate?"

I stood up, following my hands to make my voice carry more clearly.

"That is not a very sailorlike speech, my friend," I shouted, yet striving to conceal anger. "But as you put humanity on those terms, I'll answer you. I have been in the merchant service, and commanded ships."

"Well? Is that so? Sail, or steam?"

"Steam—the old *Atlas* line. Do you take us aboard?"

He did not answer directly, but had lost his air of indifference, striding forward to the end of the poop, and giving orders to the men forward. The black heads adorning the forecabin rail disappeared, and a moment later the round, red face again appeared.

"Aye, we'll take yer, sir," he called down, a touch of deference in his hoarse voice. "Ye'll understand the trouble once yer come aboard. Ye'll all be able to climb, I reckon?"

"We have a woman with us."

"It'll be quite a job to rig up a swing, sir."

I turned and looked at her; then up the straight steel sides looming before us, but before I could speak, she had made decision.

"I can go up the ladder, Mr. Hollis," she said firmly. "I am not afraid."

"All right," I called. "Lower away, and send a man down to steady it below."

The little dinghy swept in easily, and, under my directions, McCann awkwardly fended it off from scraping against the steel sides. As the rope ladder straightened, I caught the lower coil, and held it firmly. Down the ratlines, hand over hand, until he dropped sprawling into the boat, came one of the crew—a coal black negro. The fellow above, now standing on the rail and clinging to a backstay, roared down at him.

"Haul her in, Simms; haul her in. That's more like it. Now hold all taut. Send up the lady first, captain; there'll be a hand to help her in the chains."

She did not hesitate, grasping the rope firmly in her hands as the negro and I lifted her high enough to get foothold.

"You are all right, Miss Vera?"

"Yes," she called down.

"Then go up, but hold tight; the vessel may roll."

McCann followed, too glad to thus escape me to refuse, yet plainly enough half dead with fear. As soon as I saw his legs dangling, while the seamen above dragged him inboard, I drew myself up to the lower ratline, leaving the negro alone to hold the line.

"Hey, above there," I shouted. "What shall we do with the boat?"

"Let her go; there is no room to stow it on deck. Come aboard, Simms."

We went up together, the ladder swinging dizzily to our movements. The voice of the man who seemed to be in command growled down from the poop:

"Haul in the ladder, and stow it; then go forward and get some o' that rifle overboard afore dark. This way, captain; I'd like a private word with yer afore yer go below."

There were perhaps a dozen men in view, a typical freighter's crew, I judged, mostly foreign faces, two of them negroes. They worked silently, and then shuffled forward, without exhibiting the slightest interest in my presence, or giving a glance aft.

"I am very glad to welcome you on board the Indian Chief, captain—Captain—"

"Hollis," I answered shortly. "And your name?"

"Masters—Gideon Masters."

"In command?"

"Well, yes, in a way. I reckoned, you'd want the whole story, an' thet things hed better be explained afore yer went below."

"Of course; but first a question or two, Mr. Masters. What has become of my companions?"

Hollis and Vera find their courage severely tested. The final decision is made by the girl in a manner that wins full admiration from her protectors.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)